

THE ROLE OF PRIESTS IN A SYNODAL CHURCH

Many questions surrounded the role of the Catholic priest and priesthood in today's church were emerging well before the synodal process began. They circled round several major factors: the global abuse of clerical power and the open wounds abuse still inflicts on thousands of Catholics; the cancer of clericalism; the failure to recognise the place of women in the Church. All this has been summed up by using the descriptive term: 'We inhabit a dysfunctional two-tier church' which involved what has been described as a 'mass-lobotomisation of the laity' – however unintentionally performed!

The synodal process threw up the question for many: 'Should priests exist'? This quickly morphed into: 'Since they clearly exist, what should define their role in a synodal church'? Timothy Radcliffe at the start of the Synodal Assembly retreat on October 2023 provided a useful context: *'Who shall we be in this Church which is liberated from clericalism? How can the clergy embrace an identity which is not clerical? This is a great challenge for a renewed Church. Let us embrace it without fear, a new fraternal understanding of ministerial priesthood! Perhaps we can discover how this loss of identity is actually an inherent part of our priestly identity. It is a vocation to be drawn beyond all identities, because "who we are is yet to be revealed" (1 John 3.2).'*

We can widen this open-ended perspective with great necessity even further and ask: Who shall the laity be in a Church 'liberated from clericalism'? This opens the door to asking: 'Who shall all the baptised be in a synodal one-tier, joyful, missionary Church'?

'New wineskins, new wine'.

In the Church as it teeters on the cusp of a synodal character yet to be remotely fully discerned there is no convincing theology or spirituality of the priesthood as it presently exists. This lack of a convincing shape of priesthood partly drives the call for a synodal church. Present recent attempts to define priesthood read equally well as descriptions of the nature and role of any baptised Christian. The shape defining the figure of the priest has grown vaporous. It crumbles into dust like those zapped villains in the Marvel comic movies or a Harry Potter film. Theologies and spiritualities of the ordained ministry down the ages since the earliest days of the church emerged from and suited the spirit of the age

and served the church and people of that age with varying degrees of success. This was true of the priesthood since the Council of Trent up to and since the Second Vatican Council. But this theology and spirituality of a priesthood which served its age well, is now truly obsolescent. There is a pressing need to discern afresh the shape of a priesthood fit for a synodally shaped church and its mission to the peoples of our threatened age. Such a shape has yet to emerge clearly. All that can be offered are a few tentative thoughts for the consideration of the community of the synodal church as it emerges and grows in its search for the actions of the Holy Spirit.

The need for a new definition of the priest has nothing to do with individual priests – their goodness or their deficiencies. The Church and the world have benefitted incalculably from the dedicated service and life-giving energies of generations of priests in every age. Clericalism¹ is a description given to a culture, a system, which holds both priest and laypeople in its grasp. But there is now an urgent need for a new paradigm, a new definition of what priesthood means in a truly synodal Church. New wine skins for new wine.

A GOSPEL MODEL OF THE PASTORAL

John's Gospel closes with the well-known threefold dialogue with Peter. It comes after Jesus took bread and gave it to the disciples - and the same with the charcoaled fish. Might these words echo, like at Emmaus, a eucharistic dimension? This meal on the beach could well have been a 'last' thanksgiving, friendship, hence Eucharistic, supper? Jesus solemnly choose, as its climax, to ask Simon, son of John, three times, whether he loves him. Jesus in threefold affirmation of Simon's increasingly fraught assertions, gives him the pastoral task: 'feed my lambs'; 'look after my sheep', 'feed my sheep'. This primacy of the pastoral role of nurturing, looking after, caring for, is given to Peter. It has been taken up of course by the Church and applied to the Bishops and to those who share that priesthood, priests and deacons. That priesthood has been largely confined to male celibates. In a synodal vision might it not extend to all those who, like Peter at the end of that intense and intimate dialogue, hear Jesus say: 'Follow me!' (John 21: 13-19)? There are men and women, married or single whose love and following of Christ could be asserted in three-fold wise as forcibly as did

¹ Dr Elissa Roper. *Foundations for Being a Synodal Church. A Church beyond Clericalism*. Webinar at www.rootandbranchsynod.org

Simon. And they have the pastoral charism, which Jesus saw in Simon, which could equip them to feed, care for and nurture in turn the charisms of others for the building up of the People of God in its service of the Kingdom.

This becomes clearer if we re-cast baptism as entry into the 'companionship of the empowered', the People of God, as priests, prophets and sovereigns - all called to follow Christ. From that common priesthood, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, arises the pastoral task of discerning the various forms which the baptismal priestly pastoral gifts or charisms take. This is the pastoral task given to Peter – the gift of discerning 'taking care of', all the lambs, the sheep, feeding, nurturing the charisms of all the baptised. In this way lambs and sheep are empowered to become adults, all equally exercising their baptismal charisms for the building up of the community of those empowered to follow Christ in the task of announcing and building the Kingdom of God 'on earth as it is in heaven'. This is the prime pastoral mandate which could redefine the ordained ministry. The presbyter (priest) - he or she - has been given the charism of identifying, caring for, feeding, nurturing the members of the People of God. Or 'ordering' (in the sense of arranging or disposing) the interlinked parts which make up the 'Body of Christ' - the community of the empowered. Hence this brings new life to the old description of ordination as the sacrament of 'orders.'

NEW WINE, NEW WINESKINS – A SYNODAL CHURCH?

Some of the main features of a future synodal church, can be identified in no particular order, if not fully defined: a re-emphasis on the primacy of a baptism shared by all the faithful, clergy and lay, along with the distribution of its gifts and charisms – as priests, prophets and sovereigns; an equality, an inclusivity which acknowledges the variety of charisms; an acceptance by all of the need to seek the discernment of the Holy Spirit through prayer; an agreement that synodality is at the service of mission - for the Kingdom of God; an agreement to define what is involved in regarding the local church as 'the companionship of the empowered'; agreement to embody the notion that 'decisions affecting all, must be shared by all' in whatever agreed practical ways; an agreement that synodal virtues or values include mutuality in listening, the duty to speak with parrhesia (bold honesty), the need for mutual respect towards all, the need to exercise affection towards all; an acknowledgement that all the baptised share in a spirit of co-

responsibility for the life, worship and mission of the local church. Lastly an agreement on the role of those in a newly envisaged ministry to 'order', serving to arrange and assemble the community.

Just one word about celibacy. It is a baptismal charism and could contribute to the health and mission of the People of God. In its present form as legally required of all priests it has one major overriding drawback. It forms a barrier to sharing in life in human communities which few individual priests have the gifts to surmount. A seminary priest asked a new seminarian: 'Why are you here?' When he fumbled his answer the priest gave him the 'correct' one: 'You are here to learn how to be a man alone!' The Catholic priest stands 'apart' from the mess of family life, the pressures of family living, all the 'slings and arrows' but also the joys and benefits of raising children, of marriage as 'a school of love.' The laity love their priests but they have constantly to make allowances, to love them through their inability to relate to women effectively, to children, to youngsters, to men and women as equals in the mix of community, civil, civic and working life. The few that can bring the valid mystery of a celibate life to the building up of the mystery of the Church. But celibacy cannot be the distinguishing mark of a synodally shaped priesthood. It certainly cannot continue to be a prerequisite for ordination. Married priests, men and women freed to mix fully in the market square and the street, to precisely not 'life alone' must become the norm.

THE ORDAINED MINISTRY – IN A SYNODAL CHURCH

The community of the People of God (the companionship of the empowered) having identified the requisite baptismal charisms, propose such a person (male or female, married or single, celibate or no) for ordination by the Bishop acting in the name of the whole community..

What are those 'baptismal charisms' which might mark someone out for ordination? What role do priests play in a synodal church? Above all the priest is defined as someone with the baptismal charism of being able to identify the baptismal charisms of all other members of the companionship of the empowered and then, in a variety of ways, having the charisms necessary to undertake the ministry of service in the shape of nurturing, empowering and mandating them to undertake the mission of the church out into the world. Thus is built up the Body of Christ, the People of God.

The priest, in a nutshell, is someone who can discern their own baptismal gifts of discernment. This will mean they are open to the discernment which the community brings to the process of mutual discernment and a willingness to recognise that gift in themselves. They are skilled not only in discerning the charisms of others but also crucially they have an ability to work in collaboration with others to identify the concrete life, worship and mission of a particular local church – a particular parish. The gift of priestly discernment is applied to individuals but in the context or dream of the overall or end purpose – the mission – of a community. The priest is focused on asking: what are the disparate variety of charisms which can be fused together in this place to create a community of ‘missionary disciples’.

THEORY SEEKING PRACTICAL EXPRESSION

The footings of the theoretical description of the role of the priest in a synodal church can be delineated maybe, but the features of any resulting building are less easy to discern. Nor need they be, since they have, if they are to be valid, to emerge from the collective discernment of the community of a synodal church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The following are conjectures of shapes only dimly appearing in the mists.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

The community recognises that Mrs N has a real gift of discerning the charisms of others; moreover she has a clear sense of the shape of an empowered community in the inner city in a very pluralistic neighbourhood. She agreed to be proposed for ordination and undertook the year’s training. She is a married woman with children. She heads a small executive of the parish pastoral council, pending the expected reform of the Code of Canon Law. She receives an interim stipend from the diocese. Eventually there will be an agreement on which positions will be funded by the parish, by the diocese or by some other means.

The PARISH TO MISSION group is seeking external advice and ecumenical links to identify and link parish resources to help meet local needs: loneliness; isolation; poverty; joblessness, fuel poverty; drug use; asylum seekers and refugee support; food banks; support for the NHS etc

Mrs X has the gift of being a spiritual guide or adviser for other individuals. She nurtures and empowers others in this way. She has been deputed by the PPC to lead weekly lectio divina and silent contemplative prayer meetings. She has gathered a small team round her to provide these.

Mr T has the great charism of presiding at worship – including the eucharist. He has been tutored by the Liturgy vicariate and authorised to preside at parish eucharists. He has the support of a liturgy group of parishioners, music and instrumentalists. Mrs S also has this charism and is in training.

Miss J has been judged to have the charism and experience to lead the J&P, LiveSimply Cafod scheme; one member of her team is working to develop a green strategy for decorating the church with greenery and arrangements of local flowers; a parish allotment and orchard is planned.

Mrs G leads the Green Ecological Laudato Si Group. Green sustainable energy; practical measures to reduce the parish and school carbon footprint to zero are well in hand. Creation and ecological education and spirituality is seeking liturgical leaders. There is a finance and plant management Group. It seeks to go green

DX and a team of young people lead the Parish Youth development initiative.

Fr D, the previous Parish Priest, now in his 80s, has the charism of providing the sacrament of the Sick and of conducting funerals. He has been freed of much of the admin and financial, school governing duties to concentrate on these pastoral aspects of the parish. He sings and smiles a lot.

Similar charisms are being exercised in the name of the community and under the pastoral leadership of Mrs N and her team of pastoral workers. These include: Care for the sick; a mental health team; an LGBTQ Gift and Service team; a Growing Old Gracefully network; a Root and Branch DIY group; a 'Can we Do All This' group is looking at resources; the social affairs group is planning a pilgrimage round the parish perimeters taking in the various public houses and eateries.

CONCLUSION.

There is no conclusion! This is 'work in progress' as together we walk in search of the flame blown along by the tempestuous gale of the Holy Spirit! To broaden what Timothy Radcliffe said of priests to embrace all the baptised: 'Ours is a vocation to be drawn beyond all identities, because "who we are is yet to be revealed" (1 John 3.2)'.

David Jackson (October 2023, revised January 2024)

Autobiographical note to provide the context:

A traditional Catholic upbringing and schooling in the north of England, was followed by entry into a seminary in 1955 and 9 years later in 1964 to ordination to the priesthood. After a Cambridge degree, a PGCE and four years teaching back in a junior seminary in 1973 I obtained an MA in Religious Studies, concentrating on world religions. During that year I left the priesthood, was laicised and married in the Church. I am now 85, celebrating a golden wedding anniversary, with three children and six grandchildren. After teaching and inspecting religious education in both LEA and Catholic schools, I worked as the interreligious coordinator for a northern diocese and a member of the Catholic Hierarchy's Committee for Other Religions (2000 – 2011). I am now a member of the diocesan steering group for the synodal process, a member of the J&P Climate Action Group, ACTA, and a Laudato Si Animator and value contemplative silence!